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In The News

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LONG BEACH, Calif. (Army News Service, Sept. 10, 2002) -- The new U.S. Northern Command will strive to help defend the homeland against terrorism in the same spirit that the National Guard has dealt with homeland defense, natural disasters and civil disturbances for centuries, the recently appointed commander told National Guard leaders Sept. 7.

And there is no way the Northern Command can perform its new job without the Guard, Air Force Gen. Ralph Eberhart told the 1,800 delegates gathered in Long Beach, Calif., for the National Guard Association of the United States' 124th annual conference.

"We can't have a Northern Command, we can't provide for the homeland defense and the homeland security of this great nation and this area of responsibility without the National Guard," said the polished Eberhart to loud applause during a 30-minute address that he delivered without a script.

"We will have to continue to do those things that you've done forever, in terms of mitigating the circumstances surrounding floods, fires, hurricanes, and the list goes on," said Eberhart. "Yes, mitigate what might happen in terms of a terrorist attack.

"My view is that the Guard is going to play, has played and will continue to play squarely in every mission of our armed forces, from peacekeeping and peace making to, God forbid, global war," he added.

It was the first time that many of the Guard leaders from the 50 states and four territories heard first-hand how the Northern Command will function and how much their 460,000 citizen-soldiers and airmen are valued by the general who was named the new homeland defense command's first commander in June.

Eberhart, a 1968 Air Force Academy graduate who flew 300 combat missions in Vietnam and who has since served for two years as the Air Force vice chief of staff, will officially assume his new command at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., next month.

However, he has clearly done his homework about the National Guard's contributions to the nation's defense, at home and abroad, and shaped the Northern Command for the task ahead.

Two of the first three Army divisions that deployed for World War I came from the Guard, Eberhart pointed out, and three National Guard observation squadrons were given Spitfires in September 1942 as part of the United States' participation in World War II.

He vowed to select the best people who apply for the Northern Command's positions regardless of their military affiliations, including the junior enlisted people and junior officers.

"We will not accept from the personnel community [the idea] that this has to be an active-duty Army person or that this has to be an active-duty Air Force person," Eberhart stressed. "If a Guard member is best suited to fill that position and he or she is available, that's who we will hire, I assure you."

He has already, for example, selected Maj. Gen. H. Steven Blum, former commander of

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the Virginia Army Guard's 29th Infantry Division, as his chief of staff following Blum's successful tour as commander of allied forces in northern Bosnia last winter.

"I thought it was very encouraging. He clearly has a great grasp of the history of this country and the role the National Guard has played over the years and how much we are integrated with the entire military structure," said Maj. Gen. Raymond Rees, acting chief of the National Guard Bureau.

"We're going to have 23 other Army and Air National Guard officers and noncommissioned officers working there, and we want to make more positions available for the National Guard on that staff," said Rees during his State of the Guard address the following morning. "We're looking for state contributions to this, individuals with skills needed at Northern Command."

The Northern Command in almost every case will support another agency, "in most cases a lead federal agency that's been asked for help by your governors," said Eberhart.

The assignments could come from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the FBI, or the Coast Guard, he said, adding "we will take tasking authority or taskings from the lead federal agency or from whomever is in charge."

The major difference between the Northern Command and the commands established for Europe, the Pacific, and for Central and South American after World War II, said Eberhart, is that the homeland, the United States, is in the new area of responsibility.

That means the Northern Command will have to provide unified support for civil authorities as well as for the president and the secretary of defense, he added. That, in turn, will require improving relations with local law enforcement agencies to detect and deter terrorist acts and to train and work with emergency responders.

"This should not be a sandlot pickup game. And I don't know of anything more important to do as we invest our money in equipment, in training, and in exercising," Eberhart said. "We can't let the culture of the way we've always done it stand in the way. I'm not satisfied with trying to keep a bad situation from getting worse. I would much rather prevent that situation. And we have to do that together."

Rees explained that a series of experiments and exercises during the next year will "instruct us on how these forces will be brought together."

"We've been working together pretty darned good," Eberhart pointed out. "We know how to work together to solve the problem."

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